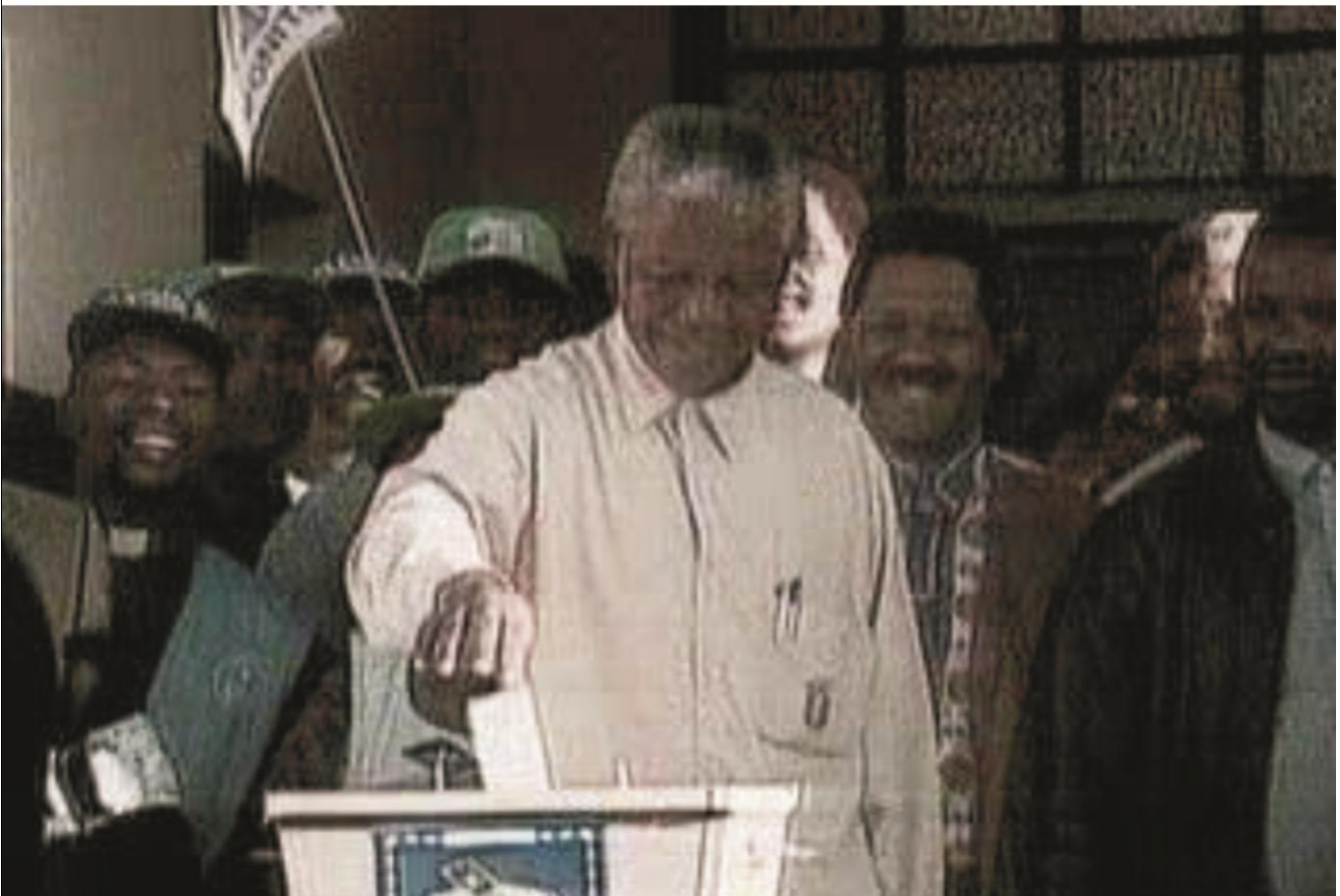


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*Compilation of E-Books on Democracy*

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# Great Powers

## I INTRODUCTION



### **Big Three, Tehrān, Iran**

Soviet leader Joseph Stalin, United States president Franklin D. Roosevelt, and British prime minister Winston Churchill, seated left to right, meet in Tehrān, Iran, in 1943 to discuss their military strategy and post-World War II policy for Europe. The leaders decided to invade France in 1944, against Churchill's recommendations. The meeting marked the apex of the East-West wartime alliance. Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill, the leaders of the three major Allied powers, came to be known as the "Big Three."

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Great Powers, the most powerful nations. Political scientists often refer to nations as states—that is, territories controlled by a single government and inhabited by a distinct population. At any given time, about half a dozen states possess the majority of the world's power resources. Generally, a great power can be defeated militarily only by another great power. Great powers also tend to share a global outlook, based on a need to protect national economic, political, and security interests that may extend throughout the world. Sometimes the status of great powers is formally recognized in an

international structure. For instance, in the Concert of Europe that prevailed throughout much of the 19th century, the great powers of Britain, France, Austria, Prussia, and Russia agreed to meet regularly to promote and preserve peace in Europe. After World War II ended in 1945, the United Nations Security Council provided a forum for coordinated action by the great powers in the second half of the 20th century—the United States, Britain, France, the Soviet Union, and China.

## II SOURCES OF POWER

Political scientists define power in the international political system as the potential to influence other states. Such potential derives from a mix of elements, both tangible and intangible. These elements include natural resources, industrial capacity, military forces, population size, and popular support for the government. Economic capability determines the military potential of individual states. For this reason, the best single indicator of a state's great-power potential may be its total gross domestic product (GDP), which measures the total value of goods and services produced in a given time period. The GDP provides a rough indicator of an economy's size, technological level, and wealth.

Because power derives from enduring characteristics of states, the status of great powers changes very slowly. Britain and France have been great powers for 500 years, Russia and Germany for over 250 years, the United States and Japan for about 100 years, and China for 50 years. Rarely does a great power—even one defeated in a massive war—lose its status as a great power. Since the 16th century, only six other states have possessed great-power status: Italy, Austria (Austria-Hungary), Spain, the Ottoman Empire, Sweden, and The Netherlands.

## III IMPERIAL OVERSTRETCH AND THE DECLINE OF GREAT POWERS

The network of relations between powerful states that constitute a great-power system first emerged in Europe during the 16th century and solidified during the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). At the conclusion of this war, the Peace of Westphalia established the principles that have shaped modern international relations. Foremost among these principles is sovereignty, the respect for the political

independence and territorial integrity of states. Since the Peace of Westphalia, the great powers have maintained a balance of power—preserved through shifting alliances and recurrent wars—that generally prevents one state from conquering the others.

The great powers of 16th-century Europe were England, France, Spain, Austria, and the Ottoman Empire. The Habsburg family ruled Austria and Spain. Habsburg power peaked in the late 16th century when Spain conquered Portugal. But the Thirty Years' War resulted in the defeat of the Habsburgs by a coalition of nations, including France, Sweden, and the German principalities. At the end of the war, The Netherlands assumed dominance of international trading routes and joined the ranks of the great powers, displacing Spain.

Spain's decline as a great power dated from the beginning of the 16th century, when it experienced a string of costly wars against France and a failed attempt to invade England. The collapse of Spanish power offers an example of *imperial overstretch*, the fate that befalls great powers when they extend their influence beyond what their size and capabilities can sustain. The Netherlands declined in power in the 18th century when its commercial and maritime rivalry with Britain led it into a series of debilitating wars. In the 20th century, Britain and France declined as great powers when they held onto their far-flung colonial empires for too long.

## IV THE GREAT POWERS SINCE WORLD WAR II

The United States and the Soviet Union, World War II allies against Germany, became opposing "superpowers" after 1945. These two nations dominated great-power relations for 40 years during the Cold War. During this period, Europe split into rival power blocs, composed of nations with membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and those affiliated through the Warsaw Pact. Regional tensions in Europe mirrored the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. The superpowers also sought to acquire influence throughout the rest of the world, often by supporting local factions and armies in regional or civil wars. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 upset the balance among great powers by leaving the United States as the lone superpower, significantly stronger than the world's remaining great powers.

Today's great powers—the United States, Britain, France, Russia, and China—all have large military forces and substantial nuclear weapons capabilities. Japan and Germany—with huge economies and relatively large military forces but no nuclear weapons—also qualify as great powers. These seven states control over half of the world's economy, 68 percent of world military spending, 27 percent of its soldiers, 95 percent of arms exports, and 99 percent of nuclear weapons. The only other states of comparable economic size are Italy and perhaps India, neither of which has the global outlook or military strength to qualify as a great power. India, which now has nuclear weapons capability, and Brazil are regional giants that have the potential to become great powers in the 21st century.

The United States dominates great-power relations as the world's only superpower. Its economy equals that of the next three largest states combined—Japan, China, and Germany. Its military spending exceeds that of the other six great powers combined by more than \$100 billion. The influence of the United States in the international political system is commensurate with its dominant status in the world. For example, international involvement in post-Cold War conflicts—such as the Persian Gulf War in 1991 and the civil war in Bosnia that began in 1992—largely depended on U.S. leadership and demonstrated the profound gap in military capabilities between the United States and other great powers.

Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States became more assertive of its superpower status. As part of the government's "war on terror," President George W. Bush committed the United States to a policy of preemptive war—the use of force to attack potential threats before they are able to fully threaten the United States. This policy became known as the Bush Doctrine. Thus, the United States launched an invasion of Iraq in 2003 despite the opposition of great powers such as France, Russia, China, and Germany. See U.S.-Iraq War.

As U.S. power has grown, however, smaller states have gained the ability to challenge great powers in international affairs. The growth of nuclear proliferation and the potential spread of nuclear weapons to new states has provided the opportunity for a second-tier power, India, to claim great power status, and has allowed a small state, North Korea, to resist the will of the great powers. Globalization has provided opportunities for lesser powers and even for nonstate organizations, such as terrorist

groups, to challenge great powers. Nevertheless, the size and significance of the great powers assures that they will remain the central actors in international relations.

Reviewed By:

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